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SUBJECT: AEC CHAIRMAN VRAALSEN ARGUES FOR MORE INDEPENDENCE AT FINAL PRESS CONFERENCE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: AEC Chairman Tom Vraalsen, wrapping up a contentious two year stint in Khartoum, held a final press conference December ¶3. He used his statement to warn of the dangers of the current NCP-SPLM stalemate and to argue for a more pro-active AEC led by a chairman with increased independence. The press conference was well-attended by Sudanese journalists and received widespread coverage in the local press. However, there was no attendance by members of the international media, who were probably distracted by the "teddy bear drama" across town. This was unfortunate, as Vraalsen was probably hoping to garner international coverage that would translate into increased pressure on Khartoum. END SUMMARY.

Samples of Media reaction  
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¶2. (SBU) According to an AEC official, many of the questions posed by the Sudanese journalists attending the press conference focused on the circumstances surrounding Vraalsen's resignation (itself rather old news), such as whether he had been pressured to resign by the NCP. The actual coverage reported Vraalsen's denials, and did not report any of the background to the story - that Vraalsen had in fact felt constantly checked by an NCP determined to limit his freedom of action.

¶3. (U) The independent "Khartoum Monitor" English daily newspaper bore the front page headline: "Vraaslen: Assessment and Evaluation Commission Should be Transparent." Its coverage stressed Vraalsen's judgment that the CPA partners have not made proactive use of the commission, leaving the AEC to operate as a passive monitoring agency.

¶4. (U) The independent "The Citizen" English daily carried the very misleading headline on its front page: "CPA Chairman bows out with praise for NCP, SPLM." The article noted that Ambassador Vraaslen stated that his resignation was based only on a two-year contract he signed with the Norwegian government to serve as chair of AEC. He insisted there was no pressure on him to resign, it reported.

¶5. (U) The semi-independent NCP "Al Ray Al Aam" Arabic-language daily newspaper of Sudan Vice President Osman Taha carried the front-page headline: "Vraaslen: My resignation was not due to any pressure from NCP." It said that Ambassador Vraaslen stated his resignation was for private reasons, with no pressure from any source. Amb. Vraaslen called upon the NCP and SPLM, as CPA partners, to build a genuine partnership and mutual understanding to implement sensitive and complex CPA clauses.

¶6. (U) The Pro-NCP "Al Hayyat" Arabic-language daily and pro-DUP "Wahdi" Arabic daily also carried the story on their front pages, with the headline: "Vraaslen: Dialogue and Understanding between the two partners Represents an Essential Element for resolving the outstanding Problems." The papers highlighted Vraaslen's statement urging the NCP and SPLM as CPA partners to stop using the media for trading accusations, but rather to build a constructive partnership to resolve the contentious issues, especially Abyei.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: At the press conference, Chairman Vraalsen successfully shifted attention from the circumstances of his resignation to his "message:" that the two CPA parties should begin working as true partners for the good of the country, and that the AEC chairman should be granted more freedom of action. At least in the Khartoum press, the message came through. Unfortunately, Vraalsen was ignored by the international press. Our AEC source gloomily noted that not a single foreign reporter had attended the farewell press conference, acknowledging the sad reality that "they must all have been across town covering the teddy bear affair." In fact, Vraalsen was probably hoping for some international coverage in order to pressure the NCP. He has long argued that the AEC Chairman should enjoy the freedom to address the press, as he repeated in his final remarks (attached below). Vraalsen's decision to hold the press conference at all (despite the NCP's stated position that this requires the approval of both parties) seems a disgruntled short-timer's parting shot and perhaps an effort to establish a precedent for the next AEC chair.

TEXT OF VRAALSEN STATEMENT  
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18. (U) Below is attached the text of AEC Chairman Tom Vraalsen's introductory statement at the December 3 press conference, as distributed by the AEC:

BEGIN TEXT OF VRAALSEN STATEMENT:

Opening Statement by Ambassador Tom Vraalsen  
At the Press Conference held on  
December 3d, 2007 in Khartoum

As some of you know, my term as Chairman of the Assessment and Evaluation Commission is soon coming to an end. I have requested

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the Norwegian Government to assign me to other duties. I am scheduled to depart from Khartoum next week.

I wanted to meet with you before my departure to talk about the CPA and the AEC.

I wish to make it clear that I am not speaking for the collective membership of the AEC. You will readily understand that my remarks do not reflect the views of all Commission members. What I wish to share with you today is my own personal observations based on two years service.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA):  
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On CPA implementation which has been the subject of considerable political debate lately, the track record of the parties is uneven.

As you will see from the AEC factual report "CPA implementation 2007", much has been achieved. You will find the report on the AEC webpage: [www.aec-sudan.org](http://www.aec-sudan.org).

As I said, much has been achieved. The cease-fire is holding apart from the serious incident in Malakal in November 2006. Federal and State administrative structures are in place including the GONU and the GOSS. The INC, ICSS and State Constitutions have been adopted.

This, if I may say so, has been the easy part of CPA implementation. Now, the Parties are engaged in dealing with core issues concerning security, politics and economics. Such complex and sensitive issues can only be professionally dealt with through a genuine partnership. Dialogue, understanding, will to seek common ground, flexibility and compassion are key elements in founding a working relationship.

The Parties claim to be partners. Of course, they are `as signatories to the CPA. However, it is difficult for the outside observer to see a genuine partnership in action. It is essential

for NCP and SPLM to build that kind of relationship. Public haggling over facts, mutual accusations, allegations and recriminations do not help build a constructive partnership.

There are provisions in CPA of great political importance where implementation is seriously behind schedule. I would not be too worried when delays occur if the Parties are in agreement on how to deal with the situation. The problem arises when the parties accuse each other of violating the peace agreement without agreeing on how to handle the situation and move forward.

The present political problems with regard to CPA implementation are a matter of serious concern to all of us. The stalemate carries in it seeds of lasting damage to the partnership which is needed in a CPA context. The door to a solution to the present problems must be unlocked immediately. The alarm bells are ringing louder here. They are also ringing louder in neighboring countries.

The leadership of both Parties has repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the CPA. I urge the Parties to deliver on their commitments. They owe it to the people of Sudan.

The Assessment and Evaluation Commission (AEC):

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The Commission has during its 25 months existence held 26 Regular Plenary Sessions, 13 Special Plenary Sessions and numerous Working Group meetings. Through hard work over 12 months the Commission has produced a "Factual Report on the Status of CPA Implementation 2007".

The Commission has by no means been dormant or passive as some are alleging. It has however, not been visible in the public domain. This is due to built in constraints and limitations imposed by the Presidential Decree establishing the Commission and in the Commission's own Rules of Procedure. Another point is that I don't believe in megaphone diplomacy. I don't believe in big headlines. You often achieve more through a quiet and responsible approach.

Of late, much has been said about the Commission. It rose into prominence during the political crises in October/November.

In his press conference on October 21 st, Vice-President Ali Osman Taha stated that the AEC is a CPA mechanism that enables the two parties to jointly and objectively gauge the extent of progress being made and control the pace of implementation. The Vice-President voiced expectations and encouragement for the AEC to engage in efforts to get CPA implementation back on track.

During the first two years of AEC's existence, the Parties have not made pro-active use of the Commission. The same is the case for the

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international members and observers. The Commission has operated as a passive monitoring agency.

The Commission has the potential to develop into a pro-active mechanism that can facilitate and promote implementation of CPA. To achieve that the working methods of the Commission must undergo fundamental changes.

The Chair has to be given more freedom of movement and expression. He/she must be allowed to speak the truth even if that implies criticism of one Party or the other or even both. The Chair must be empowered to decide on his own to attend meetings called to consider CPA implementation and to address such meetings. I have been subject to severe limitations on both accounts.

The Commission should open up for public view. It should be transparent in its operation. Documents produced by the Commission and its staff should as a general rule be made accessible to the public. This would be one measure through which the public can be better informed and in a position to contribute to implementation of CPA.

Thank You.

END TEXT OF VRAALSEN STATEMENT.

FERNANDEZ